

# USAID/OTI Venezuela Field Report

January-March 2006

---

## Program Description

In August 2002, USAID initiated a program in Venezuela to provide assistance to maintain democratic stability and strengthen the country's fragile democratic institutions. The Venezuela program, which operates out of the U.S. Embassy, is part of a larger U.S. government effort to promote democratic stability in Venezuela. The FY 2006 budget for Venezuela is \$3.6 million.

The Venezuela program has two main objectives: (1) strengthen democratic institutions and promote space for democratic dialogue; and (2) encourage citizen participation in democratic processes. USAID supports five implementing partners: Development Alternatives, Inc. (DAI), which focuses on dialogue, public debate, citizen participation and training for democratic leadership; the International Republican Institute (IRI) and National Democratic Institute (NDI), which offers technical assistance to political parties as a means of strengthening democratic institutions; Freedom House, which provides technical support to human rights practitioners; and the Pan-American Development Foundation (PADF), which provides support to civil society.

## Country Situation

**Difficult working relations between the US and Venezuelan Governments** – The antagonistic relationship between the US Government (USG) and the Government of Venezuela is the working background and a challenge for projects in Venezuela. The primary objective in this environment is to develop projects that bring together supporters of the opposition and the government. However, efforts are hampered in the face of the Government of Venezuela's constant public discourse which brands anything to do with the USG as malevolent and anti-Venezuelan. Visits by the U.S. Ambassador to project sites in Caracas and the interior are increasingly being accompanied by crowds of protestors, complicating the inauguration of USAID-supported social impact projects. To date, however, organizations (primarily Non-Governmental Organizations - NGOs) have demonstrated a willingness to partner with and accept USAID support, either financial or technical assistance.

**Other sources of political tensions** – Domestic political tensions are on the rise in the run up to the Presidential elections in December 2006. While President Hugo Chavez recently announced his candidacy, the opposition continues to be divided over central issues including even whether to participate in the elections and who would be a unifying candidate. Chavez, who controls every seat in the National Assembly, is the heavy favorite to win the election.

The main bridge linking Caracas with the coast and the international airport collapsed in January and has led to numerous articles in the local media about the decaying infrastructure in Venezuela. Price controls continue to result in periodic shortages of basic consumer goods, complicated by ongoing seizures of large land-holdings and high inflation. At the same time, Venezuela's economy is growing at a rate estimated at over 9%, primarily from consumer spending linked to the injection of billions of oil dollars into the economy, and which will almost certainly increase during this election year.

## OTI Highlights

### A. Narrative Summary

A vibrant civil society is the backbone of any healthy democracy. The Pan-American Development Foundation (PADF) began operations this quarter to provide technical assistance and financial support to local NGOs. They will begin signing grants in April with civil society organizations that work on a variety of issues, including human rights, freedom of the press, freedom of speech, and legislative and judicial system monitoring.

Freedom House is exposing Venezuelan human rights organizations and practitioners to successful strategies employed by human rights defenders in other countries.

USAID is about to launch a national program to increase citizen participation in government at the local level. The program will have two basic elements: 1) support for citizen participation in local planning councils and 2) training for democratic leadership ("Democracia Entre Nosotros"). These projects will start in April with a goal of educating the population on the importance of participation, as well as educating leaders on their responsibilities.

## **B. Grants Activity Summary**

USAID, through its DAI mechanism in Venezuela, has approved 244 activities totaling \$6,593,331. In addition to these funds, USAID has leveraged \$2.4 million in local contributions. Through DAI, USAID has worked with 204 different groups in 21 states, supporting several nationwide activities. The US Ambassador visited eight projects over the last quarter, including a center for autistic persons, computer training centers for low-income youth, and several little league teams.

## **C. Indicators of Success**

The small-activity component managed through DAI is achieving its objective of providing a neutral space for supporters of both the government and the opposition, to work together to resolve shared issues. A lesson learned is that the more practical the issue, the more likely that people will put aside political differences for the common good (e.g. trash, water, issues that impact women). A particularly interesting project of the past few months has been training for "community journalists" who serve as public advocates and work with local government to resolve local problems. Another project trains university students in conflict resolution for problems in low-income neighborhoods. This project was one of eight from the Andean Region (and the only one from Venezuela) recognized for their good work in a competition sponsored by the Andean Development Corporation and the Inter-American Development Bank: "Andean Volunteerism - Learning, Service, and Development."

President Chavez's constant message that citizens must become participants in their own governance has gained wide acceptance. USAID is supporting this concept by increasing opportunities for NGOs to work with citizens through workshops on how the mechanisms for participation operate at the municipal level. The demand for such training far exceeds USAID's financial capacity.

USAID's social impact projects (e.g. aid to nurseries, centers for the handicapped, support for Little League teams, and others) provide the ambassador with opportunities to demonstrate the concern of the American people for those in Venezuela. The public response to these projects has been primarily very positive. To date, the ambassador has inaugurated 36 OTI social impact projects, with news of these projects reaching over 20 million Venezuelans through the media.

## **Program Appraisal**

The Venezuela program is similar to USAID programs in other countries in this hemisphere and around the world. The program is succeeding against the original goals set out nearly four years ago, which were to reduce political tensions and to help the country work toward democratic stability. Although Venezuela remains a fragile democratic state, where free speech, rule of law, and civil society are under threat, the USAID program continues to seek to strengthen democracy so that all people can express their opinions freely in an open society.

The program in Venezuela is designed to strengthen civil society and political parties, the key components to a healthy democracy. Both groups are channels through which citizens express their desires, frustrations and concerns toward issues and find ways to correct them or continue the things they like.

For the past three and a half years, USAID has focused on increasing dialogue between the opposition and the supporters of President Chavez to reduce these societal and political tensions, and to strengthen democratic structures. Since the program started, USAID has facilitated nearly 1,400 meetings, forums or workshops, involving over 100,000 people.

## **Next Steps/Immediate Priorities**

The Pan-American Development Foundation approval of its first grants to local NGOs.

*For further information, please contact:*

In Washington, D.C: Russell Porter, LAC Program Manager, 202-712-5455, [rporter@usaid.gov](mailto:rporter@usaid.gov)